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SUBJECT Assessment of CIA Leadership Change

PAUL DUKE: ...The President's old friend and campaign manager, William Casey, resigned as CIA chief six weeks after coming down with brain cancer....

Now, four members of our team: Haynes Johnson of the Washington Post, Charles McDowell of the Richmond Times-Dispatch, Hedrick Smith of the New York Times, and Jack Nelson of the Los Angeles Times.

A bit of celebrating at the White House today, Jack, but these are not the best of times for Ronald Reagan.

JACK NELSON: Well, Mr. Reagan had to spend about 45 minutes today with David Abshire, the man who was brought in to coordinate his response to the various committees on the Hill in the investigations of the Iran-Contra scandal. He had to approve the release of a lot of documents to those investigations. And, of course, he's had a whole stream of resignations. And I would say that it's changing the face of this Administration for the second term. It's becoming, I would say, less political, less idological, more practical, more pragmatic. And all you have to do is look at the people who are leaving.

You mentioned Casey, who's leaving after the brain surgery, being replaced by Robert Gates, a career CIA man. You've got a new Press Secretary, Marlin Fitzwater, who's a career man, replacing Larry Speakes, who, of course, was very much a political appointee. And you've got the departure of Patrick Buchanan, White House Communications Director. And he and Casey were two of the real right-wing, you might say, stalwarts in that Administration. Buchanan says he's leaving the White House because he can puruse his political agenda

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outside the Administration better than he can inside the Administration.

The loss of Mr. Casey, I think, is a real distinct one for the President because he is the last of the real intimates that he has, a peer of his, 73 years old, in the national security field. You could say that Weinberger is somewhat of an intimate, but nowhere nearly as close as Mr. Casey.

DUKE: Well, I was just going to say, Casey is being succeeded by a career public servant named Robert Gates, a professional man. What does that mean for the CIA, and what does it mean for the CIA's emphasis on covert activities? We had a lot of that under Casey.

NELSON: Well, I think what it means, Paul, is a lot less covert activities, without any question, a lot quieter CIA. And the key, I think -- to begin with, there's going to be less because of the Iran arms investigations, already. But the key to understanding what the difference is going to be, I think, under Gates is to look at the kind of background the two men have.

Now, Casey really was a spy from World War II days. He had quite a distinguished career. He directed the French Resistance for the Normandy landing of the Allies. He directed the Allied agents in infiltrating behind the Nazi lines. And he believes deeply in covert activities. And he's a very flamboyant, daring kind of guy.

Mr. Gates, 42 years old, is almost the opposite. He's never been on the spy side of the CIA. He's always been on the intelligence analysis side. He's considered to be very smart but very cautious, has never really been any sort of a spy. And I think it'll make a tremendous difference.

HAYNES JOHNSON: Jack, the key is Congress, because Congress was furious in these last few years under Casey that he was going around them. And that's really the Iran thing is all about, in a way.

How do you see that working out?

NELSON: Well, I think you're right. It will make a difference. Because, I mean, if you remember, it was Senator Goldwater who wrote a letter saying he was ticked off -- that wasn't exactly his words, but it was close -- a very angry letter saying that he should notified Congress about the mining of the Nicaraguan harbor, and didn't do it.

It's going to make, I think -- I've had people tell me -- a tremendous difference in congressional relations. They were

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very rocky under Mr. Casey because he not only didn't tell them about that, but didn't tell Congress about the Iranian arms sale. And Mr. Gates has made it very clear, even before he got this job, that he believed in giving Congress more information. And as a matter of fact, he made a speech in 1985 where one of the points he made was that the future of the CIA really was to provide more information for Congress, and he could see Congress becoming more of a partner with the Agency.

HEDRICK SMITH: But Jack, you don't really expect that Reagan's policy on Nicaragua, for example, is going to change. The President, in...

NELSON: No.

SMITH: ...the State of the Union address, said what he wanted to do. And Gates is a career man, and a career man knows when to salute the Commander-in-Chief.

Isn't that right?

NELSON: Well, exactly. And as a matter of fact, one of the things that people have said about Gates is that one of his shortcomings might be that he's never been that independent. He has always been the color of whoever his commander was.

On the other hand, he is a professional. And my feeling is that he's not going to initiate any sort of covert activities, and would not be that much in favor of them.

CHARLES MCDOWELL: Jack, he was Casey's deputy. Right?

NELSON: Right.

MCDOWELL: All right. Now, when he goes up there to get confirmed on the Hill, is suddenly the whole Iran thing going to fall on his head? Is he going to spend his confirmation hearing answering what he knew and didn't know, and when did he know, about the Iran deal?

NELSON: Well, the Senate Majority Leader, Robert Byrd, has said, Charlie, that it could become a forum for covert activities by the CIA and for the CIA's operations. But he would not expect it to become a forum for the Iran arms sale, because you have a Select Committee to conduct that.

And not only that, but Senator Boren, the chairman of that committee, has said that he thinks Gates has been fairly forthcoming in his testimony before the Senate Intelligence Committee, which Boren heads, and that he would not expect his testimony before the Select Committee to become any sort of a first part of the hearings on that particular subject.

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